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# Chapter 4.9

## Climate change and God's work of election

Gijsbert van den Brink<sup>1</sup> and Eva van Urk<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

The doctrine of divine election is not the first theme that comes to mind when we examine Christian themes that might make a difference to one's attitude vis-à-vis climate change. In a recent volume on systematic theology and climate change, terms like 'election' and 'predestination' do not even occur in the index – let alone that a separate contribution on their roles has been included.<sup>3</sup> Yet, doctrines, notions and intuitions about God's work of election have become deeply engrained in the Christian mindset throughout the centuries, and it should not be ruled out that they interact – for better or for worse – with practical attitudes adopted towards all sorts of 'worldly affairs'.

In fact, that this is the case has already been hypothesized more than a century ago when Max Weber formulated his famous thesis about the causal connection between Calvinism and capitalism. Although this thesis was more subtle than has sometimes been perceived, Weber indeed posited a causal connection between John Calvin's doctrine of predestination (or rather, its effect on later generations of Calvinists) and the rise of a cultural climate in which the 'rational' pursuit of economic gain became dominant. His core idea was that Calvinistic believers who were anxious about their eternal destination came to consider a strong and ascetic dedication to their this-worldly vocational calling as a mark of their belonging to the elect.<sup>4</sup> Capitalism could then emerge since people

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<sup>3</sup> Michael S. Northcott and Peter M. Scott (eds), *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives* (London et al.: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*, 4th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 124–5.

started to reinvest the money they had earned so as to maximize their profits. Weber's thesis has given rise to an enormous amount of scholarly debate ever since it saw the light of day.<sup>5</sup> Had it been substantiated, the doctrine of election would undoubtedly have been the most prominent theological factor fuelling climate change today, since late-modern capitalism is by far its most important driver.<sup>6</sup> However, although sociologists occasionally still feel attached to it, social and economic historians have shown since the late 1970s that Weber's thesis cannot stand the test of careful quantitative research. As Philip Hoffman concludes, 'years of research in history and the social sciences have disproved ... Weber's thesis about the Protestant ethic.'<sup>7</sup> The cultural causes of capitalism are much more complex and variegated than to coincide with the specifics of one religious tradition. Yet, Weber's pivotal insight that religious doctrines may have unintended psychological consequences that shape our cultural habits still stands. It is precisely this insight that is relevant in current discussions on religion and climate change.

In what follows we will first sketch the main contours of Western doctrines of election and predestination. Next, we investigate various ways in which such doctrines arguably have been detrimental to Christian attitudes towards the climate and climate change. We then explore some interpretations of divine election that may encourage a more responsible way of dealing with contemporary climate change. Finally, we summarize our main conclusions.

## Doctrines of election and predestination in the West

Let us start with some terminological clarifications with regard to God's work of election as it has been interpreted in classical Western theology. *Election* is the act by which God chooses some people to live with God eternally, a life often conceived of as taking place 'in heaven'. It is the positive part of God's act of *predestination*: the foreordaining by which God has appointed all human beings from eternity to their final ends: eternal life or eternal death. Thus, predestination also has a negative part, which is why theologians speak about *double* predestination. This negative part is usually called *reprobation*: the eternal decree by means of which God surrenders certain people to eternal punishment, condemning them to life 'in hell'. This negative part can further be characterized as

<sup>5</sup> For a short survey, see Philip Benedict, 'Calvinism and the Making of the Modern Economic Mind', in *Calvinism and the Making of the European Mind*, Gijsbert van den Brink and Harro M. Höpfl (eds) (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 199–209.

<sup>6</sup> See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Philip T. Hoffman, 'The Church in Economy and Society', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Vol. VII: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660–1815*, Stewart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 72–86 (84). See also Benedict, 'Calvinism', 202–4.

either *damnation* (i.e. the active rejection of certain people) or *preterition* (i.e. the passively leaving people in their sins, as a result of which they remain unsaved).

The decree of predestination is often seen as logically preceding God's decision to create human beings and to permit their fall into sin ('supralapsarianism'). In order to execute the predestination decree in a just and rightful way, God decides not to repudiate innocent people but only sinners. By contrast, the decree of predestination may also be seen as logically following upon God's decisions to create human beings and to allow them to fall into sin: it is because humans have become sinners that God has decided to elect and save at least some of them ('infralapsarianism'). For our purposes, it may suffice to observe that it is within such dialectics of time and eternity, sin and grace that the doctrine of election gradually received a key role in the Western tradition, considerably affecting the minds and ways of life of many believers.<sup>8</sup>

Surely, however, such disturbing ideas about God 'arbitrarily' accepting some and rejecting others are the hallmark of one specific Christian sect, namely *Calvinism*? Indeed, this is the popular perception – but as a matter of fact this nexus of ideas is part and parcel of the entire Western tradition. As to the Eastern part of the church, doctrines of election and predestination were not elaborated in any detail since more optimistic assessments about human capacities remained dominant. Even though the human will and capacities were seen as negatively impacted by sin (to such an extent that Pelagianism – the view that humans can escape sin if they make the necessary efforts – was declined in the East as it was in the West), human free will was not completely annihilated by sin. As a result, with the help of God's grace it remained humanly possible to attain eternal salvation. In the West, the consequences of human sin were valued more seriously. For instance, according to Cyprian (third century) human nature was entirely corrupted as a result of sin. In such a context, although the freedom of the will was not explicitly denied, it is clear that human beings were hardly considered free to do good.

It is beyond dispute that the fountainhead of the Western doctrine of predestination was Augustine. Based on his personal religious experiences as an unwilling convert, Augustine framed various earlier intuitions on the decisive role of God's grace in attaining salvation into a more or less systematic account. According to Augustine, if God's grace is fully free and undeserved, it follows that those who are saved are not morally (or otherwise) better than others; thus, these others form the *massa perditionis* (multitude of the lost) because for some reason, unfathomable to us, God leaves them in their sinful state. Augustine bequeathed these ideas to the subsequent Western church. From the early Middle Ages onwards more and less stringent ways of interpreting Augustine came to fight for priority. Despite the fact that such towering figures as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure favoured a more stringent reading, the milder ways (which accentuated the need for human cooperation in faith and works, and tended

<sup>8</sup> For a short survey of the traditional debates, see Katherine Sonderegger, 'Election', in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105–20.

to bind predestination to God's foreknowledge of these) ultimately took precedence. In accordance with Augustine's ecclesiology, the role of the church's sacraments in yielding assurance of one's election was emphasized.

The magisterial Reformation, then, meant the retrieval of Augustine's doctrine of grace at the cost of his ecclesiology. What we find in Calvin's theology and later at the Synod of Dordt (1618–19) is hardly anything more than a 'republication' of Augustine's views on the prevenience of God's grace vis-à-vis the corrupted human will. And whereas Calvin teased out these views with great trepidation, the Synod of Dordt opted for the milder infralapsarian position (though without condemning supralapsarianism).<sup>9</sup> Still, it was in particular in the Reformed tradition that notions of divine predestination and election became intensified as compared to other Christian denominations.<sup>10</sup>

Late-modern revisions of the doctrine of predestination often try to overcome its inherent dualism and individualism by considering humanity as a whole to be the object of God's eternal decree. Thus, predestination is identified with election, and reprobation is either denied or seen as a temporary stage in God's dealings with the man Jesus Christ – the One who was rejected in our place in order to become chosen by God (Karl Barth). The suggested universalism, however, amounted to a break with the tradition and therefore was not universally shared. From a contemporary perspective it is easy to dismiss this predestinarian tradition as primitive, unsensitive or even ruthlessly dehumanizing. Indeed, predestination has become a 'contentious doctrine', evoking fear and anxiety among many who became obsessed with it. Moreover, it deeply divided Christian communities on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>11</sup> We should not forget, however, that, as Sonderegger notes,

it would be a misreading of the tradition to call it unscriptural or, indeed, pitiless. All major systematicians of this doctrine appeal constantly and consistently to scripture, especially to 'golden texts' in Romans, Ephesians, and the Gospel of John. Heightened in their piety was the sense of divine holiness and creaturely need and fault, themselves both deep and biblical themes. These themes are muted in our day – at least in the academic, systematic theology of our day – yet cannot fall wholly

<sup>9</sup> On Calvin, see his *Institutes* III 21.1: 'if anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place [viz. of God's eternal decree], he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter in a labyrinth from which he can find no exit.' As to the Canons of Dordt, see Gijsbert van den Brink, *Dordt in Context: Gereformeerde Accenten in Katholieke Theologie* (Heerenveen: Jongbloed, 2018), esp. 87–95. The critical part of Dordt's decisions was that, for the first time in history, a particular take on predestination was made mandatory and imposed on the entire (Dutch Reformed) church.

<sup>10</sup> See Gijsbert van den Brink and Johan Smits, 'The Reformed Stance: Distinctive Commitments and Concerns', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4 (2015), 325–47 (341, 346).

<sup>11</sup> For the US, see Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); for the European scene, see C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1987).

silent, as the uniqueness and majesty of God are the unshakeable reality confronting every creature.<sup>12</sup>

## Election and climate change: The problems

On the issue of human-induced climate change, it is not hard to see that the doctrines of election and predestination can be criticized from this perspective as well, since arguably they have detrimental effects on our approach to the environment in general and climate issues in particular.

First, the traditional conceptions of predestination and election are thoroughly anthropocentric: it is the salvation of human beings alone which is deemed all-important. Indeed, up to this very day the salvation of humans from the world (rather than with the world) is central to the spirituality of many Christian believers. Even worse: it is only human *souls* that matter in this tradition (the soul being the immaterial, non-earthly part of human existence). Due to (neo-)platonic influences, human bodies, which link us to the earthly and material world of nature, were often judged corruptible and therefore less worthwhile, if not entirely devoid of value. Thus, the entire scheme of God's dealings with the world could be reduced to the single issue of 'how does my soul end up in heaven'? Of course it can be countered that this is a caricature of what can be found in the works of all great Western theologians. True as that may be, it will not let us off the hook since this is the way in which official doctrines of election have been perceived and have affected the spirituality of countless believers.

Second, the doctrine of election is typically also thoroughly individualistic. Surely, more communal notions of election are available in the Christian tradition. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) has only one reference to election, namely in its section on the church. When it is asked 'What do you believe concerning "the holy catholic church"?', it is answered: 'I believe that the Son of God ... gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a *community chosen for eternal life* ... And of this community I am and always will be a living member.'<sup>13</sup> The community precedes the individual here, and individual life is embedded and can only flourish within the community. Many earlier and later formulations of the doctrine of election, however, focus on the individual, dividing the world's population into 'a definite number of particular people' who are saved and 'others' who are passed by.<sup>14</sup> Combined with the fact that earthly existence often paled into insignificance as compared to heavenly life, it is not hard

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<sup>12</sup> Sonderegger, 'Election', 112.

<sup>13</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, the Lord's Day 21, <https://www.rca.org/resources/heidelbergcatechism> (accessed 9 July 2019), italics added.

<sup>14</sup> Canons of Dordt, I 7; I 6, 15, <https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/CanonsofDordt.pdf> (accessed 9 July 2019).

to see how such individualism fostered an ‘avertive’ as opposed to a ‘world-formative’ spirituality.<sup>15</sup> In such an atmosphere, anthropogenic climate change will not be seen as a serious challenge but will rather be met with indifference.

Third, the strongly theocentric focus of the doctrine of election – it is God who determines it all and nobody can question God’s doings – can easily become a model for human conduct. If humans are created in the image of God, should they not relate like this God to those who are at *their* mercy, and expect from them the same sort of submission that we owe to God? John de Gruchy captures the concerns of many contemporary theologians in this regard when he asks:

If God is defined primarily in terms of dominant will and power ..., does it not inevitably mean that human beings are understood in precisely the same way, so that they see their worldly vocation as one of domination and even manipulation, or conversely as dominated servitude and submission? ... Does not such a God inevitably sanction similar social arrangements, legitimating unjust class structures, the domination of woman by men, and even tyranny?<sup>16</sup>

To such ‘similar arrangements’ we can add the exploitation of nature and the indifference towards human-induced climate change and its dire consequences. Indeed, Sallie McFague has influentially applied this concern about the image of God as the sovereign monarch to ecological issues. She argues that since the metaphor of God as sovereign king suggests an external relationship between God and the world, according to which God is spatially removed from the world instead of being intimately and caringly present to it, this metaphor is destructive of the environment.<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, as we saw the doctrine of election emerged first and foremost to safeguard the unconditional and undeserved character of the *grace* of God.<sup>18</sup> According to some, however, this notion of grace as not requiring anything in exchange has detrimental consequences, including ecological ones. Drawing on the seminal work of Marcel Mauss, John Milbank argues that premodern society was constituted by a system of gift exchange which preceded the later split between subject and object.<sup>19</sup> Gifts were

<sup>15</sup> See for these terms Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 5.

<sup>16</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South-African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 111–12.

<sup>17</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 63–9. In her later work, McFague focused more emphatically on climate change, which she sees as symptomatic of a deeper crisis: human alienation from the world.

<sup>18</sup> In what follows we are indebted to Terra S. Rowe, ‘Grace and Climate Change: The Free Gift in Capitalism and Protestantism’, in *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm (eds) (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 253–71. See more broadly Rowe’s *Toward a Better Worldliness: Ecology, Economy, and the Protestant Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (New York: Routledge, 2003); John Milbank, ‘Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic’, *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 119–61. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York:



not just objects that could be exchanged for something else ('tit for tat') but extensions of the givers, who made themselves dependent on the recipient by their gift-giving. Thus, gifts participated in the personhood of the giver, and gift exchange was not about economics but about building intricate relational networks and living in communion. Theologically speaking, this communion included both God and creation. It was only when nominalism came to posit a strong divide between God and creation that the Reformation's notion of unilaterally bestowed grace could emerge. Gifts now became mere commodities, and grace came to be seen as an external gift, bestowed by an active Giver who does not expect anything in return from the recipient – as a result of which the recipient may remain passive. Milbank especially targets Protestant doctrines of grace in this connection, since these depict God's forgiveness as freely given, without a need to make reparation on the part of the human sinner.

Whereas Milbank's worries in this connection are mainly social, economic and ecclesial, others have started to see important ecological issues lurking here as well. It seems clear that the emerging ideal of human autonomy encouraged a conception of nature as passive and inert. Environmental ethicist Michael Northcott, for example, sees a connection between the nominalist divide between God and creation and the church's renouncement of its traditional prohibition of mining; now that the relationship between humans and the earth came to be conceptualized as an external one, mining (which functions as the material base of capitalist economies) was no longer experienced as a violation of the earth.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it seems that the very notion of grace which functioned as the primary motive and rationale behind Western notions of election is complicit in the objectification of nature that lies at the root of our contemporary ecological problems – including anthropogenic climate change.

All in all, it seems we have ample reason to discard theological notions of election and predestination because they aggravate the ecological crisis and fuel negligence with regard to as urgent a global problem as current climate change. Or could we distinguish aspects and interpretations that may be a help rather than a hindrance when it comes to addressing contemporary climate concerns?

## Election and climate change: Some prospects

Although it would be an oversimplification to suggest that anthropogenic climate change might be resolved by correcting our theologies, climate change is not just a scientific problem either, since deeply ingrained cultural and social ways of thinking,

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W.W. Norton, 1990; original French ed. 1925). Mauss's view was not a romantic one: he realized that premodern gift exchange practices were not free from self-interest; yet, a fostering of the other's well-being was involved as well.

<sup>20</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 55.



perceiving and behaving are involved.<sup>21</sup> There is no doubt that religious intuitions and perspectives play an important part here. It is the task of theology to analyse such intuitions and perspectives and if need be to ‘reform or reinvent itself ... in the face of the unprecedented and unique nature of climate change’.<sup>22</sup> To what extent could and should doctrines of predestination and election be ‘reformed or reinvented’ in this connection? A couple of things might be put forward in addition to what we have seen in the previous section.

First, in response to Milbank’s point summarized above, it is by no means clear that the notion of free grace involved in Protestant doctrines of election is indeed unilateral in the sense of being exclusive of exchange. For example, according to some (Finnish) interpretations of Luther’s theology, there is a profound sense of interconnectedness in Luther’s theology of grace. Grace is not just God’s forgiveness declared to us from an external point of view (*extra nos*) but it includes union with Christ. In fact, *Christ himself* is the gift given to the sinner, not just some ‘thing’. This suggests a participatory ontology that looks very much like Milbank’s.<sup>23</sup> Reformed theology has often been more wary of concepts of human participation in the divine reality since the qualitative difference between Creator and creation was taken most seriously here. That is not to say, however, that the bestowal of divine grace was considered to remain without any response. In fact, on the contrary, the Heidelberg Catechism devotes most of its space to a lengthy elaboration of the notion of gratitude as the believer’s spontaneous response to God’s free gift of justification, spelling out in detail what sort of concrete attitudes are fit in return to (though not as a payment for!) God’s gracious acquittal of sin and guilt. It is precisely the cruder ways of *quid-pro-quo* thinking, pervasive in the later Middle Ages, that are overcome here. Moreover, as we have seen, the Protestant doctrines of grace and election were not so much creative innovations as they were retrievals of Augustine’s theology of grace. The rise of nominalism apparently did not form an unbridgeable gap here. Accordingly, experiencing and acknowledging God’s free grace today might very well elicit in us the due response of, among other things, respecting the integrity of creation.

Second, the notion of divine sovereignty which is behind the Christian doctrines of election and predestination has never been intended to take human responsibility lightly; it rather served to ground and undergird such responsibility. If indeed we are to submit to God’s sovereign will, this means that all our activities should be directed to what we can know about God’s purposes.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, until recently these purposes have rarely been extended to the climate or even the well-being of non-human life forms;

<sup>21</sup> On the cultural dimensions of climate discourse see Mike Hulme, ‘The Conquering of Climate: Discourses of Fear and Their Dissolution’, *The Geographical Journal* 174 (2008), 5–16.

<sup>22</sup> Forrest Clingerman, ‘Theologies of the Climate’, *Religious Studies Review* 42:2 (2016), 71–6 (74).

<sup>23</sup> See Rowe, ‘Grace and Climate Change’, 264–7; and Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (eds), *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> See de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 114–15.

the so-called cultural mandate was rather read as a *carte blanche* to exploit the earth.<sup>25</sup> Yet, if we are guided by the same orientation on God's will today, the global climate comes to mind quite naturally as a domain of special concern. Indeed, though there is still a long way to go (especially in terms of overcoming disinformation and sloth – that most underestimated of all sins), the awareness that the created world is God's – not ours – and therefore should be taken care of in responsible ways, seems to be gradually growing among Christians.<sup>26</sup> It has even been argued that *without a Creator* the earth becomes a warehouse from which everyone can take what one wants without restraint.<sup>27</sup> Addressing climate change from a theological perspective does not necessarily require a stronger emphasis on divine immanence at the expense of divine transcendence, as many hold.<sup>28</sup> Rather, what we need is a 'theocentric pragmatism' which starts from what is already going on in Christian communities (instead of pursuing revolutionary worldview changes), places God at the centre and makes us rethink our moral obligations towards the earth and future generations from God's point of view.<sup>29</sup>

Third, it should be kept in mind that divine election and predestination should never become isolated from the overall Christian doctrine of God, which is thoroughly Trinitarian in nature.<sup>30</sup> Where notions of God's sovereign and all-determining power are cut loose from the concrete revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ which is made known through the Holy Spirit, they should be criticized and rejected as sub-Christian. In the ordering of dogmatic themes, the doctrine of divine election might therefore best be situated at the end of our reflections on God's works in creation and redemption, not at the beginning, since otherwise it tends to obscure the significance of God's concrete salvific acts.<sup>31</sup> The electing God is the Redeemer who has encountered us in Jesus Christ, the suffering Servant, and who enlivens us through his Spirit. To quote De Gruchy one more time: 'Without the trinitarian and Christological qualifications which affirm that God's power is the power of grace and justice determined by his suffering love and overwhelming goodness in history and experience, the monarchical concept

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>26</sup> For example, in the Netherlands Christian political parties have gradually been 'greening' over the past decades.

<sup>27</sup> See Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving our World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). It should be added, though, that when the earth is regarded as the Creator's gift it can just as well be treated as a warehouse.

<sup>28</sup> Here we concur with Hilda P. Koster, 'Questioning Eco-Theological Panentheisms: The Promise of Kathryn Tanner's Theology of God's Radical Transcendence for Ecological Theology', *Scriptura* 111 (2012), 385–94.

<sup>29</sup> See Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 68; also Jacques Schenderling, 'De Ecologische Paradox', *Radix* 43 (2017), 150–61 (159).

<sup>30</sup> See Cornelis van der Kooi and Gijsbert van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 75–112, 113.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 701–8.

of God as all-powerful is an idol.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, if it is *this* God of grace and justice by whom we have been elected, the doctrine of election is a great comfort in the struggle against all kinds of injustice that we encounter. According to Reformation historian Heiko Oberman, the original setting in which notions like election and predestination came to flourish was that of persecuted Calvinist refugees. They found consolation in the knowledge that because of election they could never fall out of God's hands in the midst of all hardships and injustices they had to endure.<sup>33</sup> Here, it seems, we have an interpretation of the doctrine of election that is still relevant in times of such drastic climate change that we might easily become desperate.

This leads us to a final consideration. Recent reinterpretations of divine election try to overcome the individualism and dualism which were bound up with the traditional accounts, and they do so by retrieving some fundamentally biblical dimensions of God's work of election that have often been overlooked. In particular, biblical scholarship has brought about a twofold correction of traditional notions of election. First, both in the Old and New Testament election is much more a collective category than an individualistic one. In the Old Testament the people of Israel is the primary object of God's electing love whereas in the New Testament the Christian church is included into the people of God. And second, quite often God's election has a holistic purpose, namely to bring blessing to a world that is alienated from God as a result of sin. In other words, the election of both Israel and the church is in a profound way 'for service'. God chose the people of Abraham, culminating in the Messiah as its representative, to bring about the healing of a world fallen in sin.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, the elect community of the church exists for the sake of the other, in order to pass on God's blessing in Christ and bring his salvation and justice to the ends of the world. Teasing out the theological consequences of this biblical retrieval, Suzanne McDonald argues that '[e]lection can never simply be reduced to a vision of, or way of accounting for, personal salvation, but has in view the entire sweep of God's purposes for the whole created order.'<sup>35</sup>

It is not far-fetched to apply this insight to the issue of human-induced climate change, as one of the most egregious contemporary expressions of human sin.<sup>36</sup> This is all the

<sup>32</sup> De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 118; as his title indicates, De Gruchy develops his position especially in dialogue with Reformed theology (in particular John Calvin), but this clearly has a wider significance for Christian theology as a whole.

<sup>33</sup> See Heiko A. Oberman, *John Calvin and the Reformation of the Refugees* (Geneva: Droz, 2009), 46–9; only later, '[a]s the *réfugiés* became residents and citizens of new Reformed territories, the ... rock of faith [viz. the doctrine of predestination] changed into a stumbling stone' (48).

<sup>34</sup> See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 36.

<sup>35</sup> Suzanne McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others and Others to God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 130. Although McDonald develops this notion of 'election to representation' mainly in relation to humans, she realizes that it can also be applied to the created order, especially in light of the priestly role consigned to humans in the Genesis creation narratives.

<sup>36</sup> For a penetrating attempt to reinvigorate the doctrine of sin for our times of climate change, see Ernst M. Conradie, *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction* (Lanham: Lexington, 2017).

more so when we realize that climate change first and foremost affects the weakest and most vulnerable people. As Michael Northcott argues, 'climate pollution, deforestation, groundwater depletion, local air and water pollution, soil erosion ... are all forms of environmental damage that directly impact the livelihoods and health of the poor.'<sup>37</sup> In this connection, we should remind ourselves that in the Bible God's work of election, far from being arbitrary, is often guided by God's partiality for the poor. According to Paul, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; he elected what is low and despised in order to reduce to nothing what is viewed as something (1 Cor. 1.28). And James is even more straightforward when he chastises those who dishonour the poor, asking rhetorically: 'Didn't God elect the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love him?' (James 2.5).

## Conclusion

It follows from the above investigation that notions of election – firmly embedded as they are within Western Christianity – interact with attitudes towards global, human-induced climate change. First, we examined aspects and interpretations of election which hinder climate concerns. These have to do with individualistic and dualistic notions of human 'souls' being saved from the earth, notions which render the earth unworthy of deliberate preservation. Further, we might have genuine concerns about what kind of 'model' a monarchical God would present to humans, who might easily be tempted to regard themselves as sovereign over creation. As to notions of divine grace and forgiveness, there are problems as well: if these imply passive recipients of a divinely bestowed 'commodity' instead of partakers who somehow become active and involved in return, this may have detrimental ecological consequences.

However, we see no reasonable grounds to dismiss or totally redefine notions of divine election, since they also harbour 'creation friendly' perspectives that may open up fruitful avenues for contemporary climate ethics. For example, even Protestant doctrines of election do not necessarily conceive of grace as free from 'exchange'. An attitude of gratitude – as promulgated in the Heidelberg Catechism – is potentially very powerful in strengthening our ties with creaturely reality. Moreover, if we consider election as a function of God's steadfast love for us in Christ through the Spirit, we may gradually learn to adopt this attitude in our dealings with the created world and discover our environmental responsibilities in light of God's purposes. Finally, if God elects what is weak, vulnerable and lost (as the New Testament has it), we may be moved to look after the many contemporary victims of climate change and environmental degradation.

<sup>37</sup> Michael S. Northcott, 'Climate Change and Christian Ethics', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, John Hart (ed.) (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 286–300 (294; italics added).